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As one general takes over another bides time

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Panama is noted for its bloodless coups, and last week's overthrow of civilian President Aristides Royo was no different. The new order in Panama, for the foreseeable future, spells a shift to the right that will not be pleasing to Fidel Castro or the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and with no anticipated effect on the Panama Canal treaties with the United States.

The real power in Panama always has resided with the Guardia Nacional, the 10,000-man combined army and police force. Further down the road, U.S. officials anticipate an election between now and 1984 that will be won by the present guard commander, Gen. Ruben Dario Paredes. The only question is how long the guard leaders intend

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to let former Vice President Ricardo de la Espriella retain the presidency.

Royo, a 42-year-old lawyer with no troops, was hustled out of office either because of Panama's economic problems and social discontent or because he was perceived as being too prominent in calling for a post-Falklands conference of Western Hemisphere nations including Cuba but not the United States.

Lurking not so obscurely in the wings is the swaggering figure of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the guard's intelligence chief and the most feared man in Panama. Noriega, who looks startlingly like the late Edward G. Robinson, seems a cinch to succeed Paredes as guard

commander when Paredes moves up to the presidency.

Many observers believe Noriega is already the real power in Panama. One U.S. official has said of Noriega, "You can't buy him but you can rent him." Administration officials have said that they believe Noriega is willing to bide his time but that his ultimate ambition is to achieve the status of the late and all-powerful Omar Torrijos.

It is a mystery to U.S. officials why Paredes would prefer to give up the real power of the guard command for the empty honor of being president. Royo had no important decision-making role, and the change in leadership will have no real meaning for the 2 million people of Panama.

A U.S. official said yesterday, "Superficially it is great news." While Royo was engaged in flirtations with the left, Paredes is considered to be pro-U.S. and disposed to abide by the treaties by which Panama gradually takes over the former Canal Zone with total possession coming in the year 2000.

Noriega is more of an enigma. He reportedly has ties "as close to (CIA Director William) Casey as he does to (Cuban President Fidel) Castro," according to one Washington official.

While the U.S. policy is to accept governments as it finds them, officials already are looking beyond Royo and Paredes and wondering what the future holds when Noriega reaches the top in name as well as in fact.

The name of the policy game will be to keep the guard leaders reasonably happy and hope that the tea leaves do not some day prompt Panama to demand acceleration of the stages of the treaties in the next 16 years.